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Former Stealth Fighter Pilot Confirms Yugoslavs Hit Second US F-117 During 1999 War
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The tale of how the Yugoslav Air Defense Forces managed to shoot down a US F-117 Nighthawk in 1999 is the stuff of legend, but a US Air Force pilot who flew F-117s in the war has now come forward with a story about a second stealth fighter that Serbian forces struck. In March 1999, NATO began [a devastating bombing campaign in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia](#) even after the United Nations Security Council rejected intervention in the internal Yugoslav conflict between Albanians and Serbians. Just three days after the bombing began, on March 27, Yugoslav forces shot down an F-117 Nighthawk, one of the most prominent symbols of American military might and one of the first operational stealth aircraft.

The aircraft's low-visibility radar-wave scattering paint job, angular shape and radar-resistant coating were supposed to cause it to disappear from enemy detection; ["Sorry, we didn't know it was invisible"](#) was how the Yugoslavs boasted of their accomplishment.

However, another pilot who flew F-117s during that conflict has now come forward about a second Nighthawk that the Yugoslavs hit with anti-aircraft fire - although this one managed to limp back to base. Retired USAF Lt. Col. Charlie 'Tuna' Hainline recounted the incident on [a recent episode of The Afterburn podcast](#).

According to Hainline, who began flying "stinkbugs" shortly after they [emerged from their cloak of secrecy in 1990](#), the stealthy black jets typically flew their ground attack missions over Yugoslavia in pairs. For his squadron, flying out of Spangdahlem Air Base in Germany, missions usually lasted about six hours.

During one mission over western Budapest [that might have been on April 30](#), although he named no date in the interview, Hainline said he and his wingman, who was running a parallel track some ten miles distant, came under a hail of anti-aircraft fire, including surface-to-air missiles.

[Despite their reputation as "invisible,"](#) stealth aircraft are not 100% impervious to radar, but perform best when they are supported by radar jammers such as EA-6B Prowlers or [modern-day E-18 Growlers](#). [The War Zone reported](#). On this night, however, the stealth fighters did not have that kind of protection.

"I kind of looked to my right over Belgrade, and [saw] this huge missile coming up - it looks like a Saturn V thing," Hainline told podcast host John "Rain" Waters, referring to the huge rockets used to launch American missions to the moon.

"I knew my number two guy was over there somewhere. Then I see another launch - this big glow, and even from that far away you can see a lot of detail. The plume, the smoke going, and then just this ball of fire coming up towards you ... As I'm heading towards this target, one missile explodes and the other one kind of goes up into space," he continued. "I don't know if it hit him."

While his aircraft emerged unscathed, the other F-117 wasn't so lucky. Hainline said he lost track of his wingman for a while, until it mysteriously reappeared at a tanker rendezvous, well after the time it should have arrived, with all its lights off and unable to match the KC-135 Stratotanker's speed to refuel.

"His airplane wasn't in really good shape," Hainline recalled. However, the pilot managed to refuel after the tanker slowed down, and the plane "kind of disappeared again" until arriving back at Spangdahlem. For his efforts to get his wingman back to base, Hainline received a Distinguished Flying Cross for "heroism or extraordinary achievement while participating in an aerial flight."

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Hunger Rising Dramatically Across US Amid Record Stock Market Highs
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Debates in Congress over a new COVID-19 relief bill have dragged on for months, even as new coronavirus cases have hit record highs. A slew of federal programs designed to alleviate the economic impacts of pandemic shutdowns will expire in weeks, setting the stage for a series of crises that could leave millions more in the US hungry and homeless.

As the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated economic crisis continues, several trends in the US are converging on a new and unprecedented social crisis. By the end of the year, one in six Americans is likely to be facing hunger, as food pantries run dry and federal unemployment benefits are set to expire. Meanwhile, the stock market is posting record gains and the White House is boasting of an economic recovery.

[According to a recent report by Feeding America](#), the United States' largest hunger relief organization, one in six Americans, or 50 million people, could be facing hunger by the end of 2020. For children, that number is even higher: one in four, or 25%. Those are significant increases from 2018, when there were 37 million hungry people in America, or one person in nine.

However, the statistics don't tell the whole picture, as across the country, food banks are drying up quickly, and some communities are hit much harder than others.

Hunger Hits Communities Unequally

On Tuesday, Arizona State University's College of Health Solutions published the results of a survey done in conjunction with the National Food Access and COVID Research Team (FACT).

[The researchers found that out of 600 Arizona households surveyed](#) over the summer, almost one in three (32%) was experiencing food insecurity and that this number was higher among Latino households. One household in eight had obtained food via credit, food banks, or the charity of friends since the pandemic began.

Elsewhere, racial disparities are just as prevalent. Nationwide, of the top 25 counties with the highest projected food insecurity rates, just four were majority-white - [all of them in Kentucky](#). [National Geographic reported](#).

Further, of the 105 counties with Black majorities, 80% are projected to be food insecure in 2020. For the 28 counties with Native American and Alaska Native majorities, that number is 75%; for the 104 Hispanic or Latino-majority counties, 27% are expected to experience hunger; and of the 2,773 non-hispanic white-majority counties, 15% are expected to be food insecure. In Queens, New York, dubbed the “epicenter” of the COVID-19 outbreak in the US during the spring, the large immigrant community is buckling under the pressure. [National Geographic reported on Tuesday that across New York](#), social service organizations have reported 75% of their immigrant clients have lost jobs, and since many are not eligible for what federal support exists or fear the impact on their immigration cases if they do participate, many have turned to local food pantries to make ends meet.

However, those food banks are quickly running out.

‘Hunger Like They’ve Never Seen Before’

In Dallas last month, the grim spectacle of thousands of cars lined up to receive food giveaway packages made international headlines. [Organizers with the North Texas Food Bank reported](#) giving away enough food to feed 25,000 people on November 15 alone, telling local media it was their largest event ever.

“People are seeing hunger like they’ve never seen it before,” NTFB president Trisha Cunningham told NatGeo. “Food banks were designed to be supplemental - to fill the gaps. There are so many more gaps in our community right now.”

[In Denver, Colorado, food pantries have reported](#) increases in demand of 200% to 300%, and in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, demands have similarly doubled.

“We have almost quadrupled our tonnage in this pandemic and it’s only scratching part of the need we have right now,” [Leah Lizarondo of Pittsburgh’s 412 Food Rescue told CBS](#).

The Gund Institute at [the University of Vermont found that half of Vermonters](#) have lost jobs or suffered a cutback in hours over the last six months, and one in four Vermonters is food insecure.

[In a November 24 op-ed, the editors of the Baltimore Sun noted](#) that one quarter of Maryland’s 6 million residents were believed to be food insecure, but since March 2020, that number could be as high as 42%, or 2.5 million Marylanders, and Maryland Food Bank’s distribution this past fall has doubled from previous years.

“Such a sharp increase has no parallel in modern history,” the Sun wrote. “And that war against hunger is being waged at a time when troop strength is down - older volunteers are understandably reluctant to work in close quarters and risk exposure to the virus. Nonprofits have had to get creative to supplement their manpower.”

Steve Shelley, the CEO of Florida-based food bank Farm Share, [told NBC on Tuesday that they had received](#) what seemed likely to be their final Farmers to Families food box shipment.

“Next week may be the last week that we receive any food under that program, unless it is renewed by Congress or the US Department of Agriculture,” Shelly said. The program began on April 17 at the direction of US President Donald Trump, who set aside \$19 billion to buy farm produce and distribute it to American families in need. [According to the USDA, by the end of October](#), 110 million boxes had been delivered.

“We still have other sources of food, but I will say the Farmers to Families Food Box program has been one of the greatest stopgaps,” said Shelley.

Farmers to Families is just one of a slew of federal benefits programs set to expire at the end of the year, without an end to the pandemic in sight and with [congressional negotiations over a new relief bill](#) deadlocked.

Federal Aid Programs Soon to Expire

[CNBC reported last week that 14 million American workers](#) would lose their unemployment benefits if they were not extended, and that [payment deferments for 42 million Americans' student loans](#) will similarly end.

[Yahoo Finance reported Wednesday that for the week ending](#) November 28, the US Department of Labor reported 778,000 new jobless claims, compared to 775,000 from the week prior, and that for the week ending on November 21, 5.8 million had made continuing unemployment claims compared to 6.71 million the week before. The DoL data will be formally published on Thursday. However, Yahoo notes the data is artificially low because more people are simply stopping looking for work, especially as new lockdowns amid rising COVID-19 cases have caused fresh workforce cuts.

A ban on evictions during the pandemic will also expire on December 31, if not extended. Estimates for how many Americans could [face eviction range from 19 million to close to 40 million over the next](#) several months.

Wall Street Boasts 'Persistent Optimism' Amid Record Highs

Meanwhile, the US stock market sees major gains, with [the New York Post noting "Wall Street's persistent optimism](#) about the course of the coronavirus pandemic."

In November, the Dow Jones posted its best monthly gain since 1987, an 11.9% increase, and the S&P 500 and Nasdaq closed at record highs, [thanks to positive reported progress on several](#) COVID-19 vaccines.

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Congress Approves Bill to Bar Chinese Firms That Refuse Audits From US Stock Exchanges by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

By barring major Chinese firms like Alibaba from participating in US stock exchanges if they don't submit to what Beijing considers to be onerous procedures, a bill expected to soon be signed into law could likely drive that wealth to other markets, experts claim.

The US House of Representatives unanimously passed The Holding Foreign Companies Accountable Act on Wednesday, just as it passed unanimously in the Senate in May. US President Donald Trump is expected to sign the bill into law.

The bill would give Chinese firms three years to comply with audits by the US Public Accounting Oversight Board, a nonprofit corporation created by 2002 legislation that audits rules and standards created by the US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC). Failure to do so will result in the entity being booted from US stock exchanges.

Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying suggested to reporters on Tuesday that the policy is "discriminatory".

"Instead of setting up layers of barriers, we hope the US can provide a fair and non-discriminatory environment for foreign firms to invest and operate in the US," [she said, according to Reuters](#).

Advocates of the law say it serves to "protect Americans from being swindled" by Chinese companies that "mislead our investors" to "exploit hard-working Americans."

"It's asinine that we're giving Chinese companies the opportunity to exploit hardworking Americans - people who put their retirement and college savings in our exchanges - because we don't insist on examining their books," Sen. John Kennedy (R-LA), one of the lawmakers [who introduced the bill, said in a May statement](#).

"For too long, Chinese companies have disregarded US reporting standards, misleading our investors. Publicly listed companies should all be held to the same standards, and this bill makes commonsense changes to level the playing field and give investors the transparency they need to make informed decisions," Sen. Chris Van Hollen (D-MD), a bill co-sponsor, also said at the time.

Trump employed similar language [in an executive order last month that barred Americans](#) from investing in Chinese firms that do business with the the People's Liberation Army, China's armed forces.

Claiming that the government of Chinese President Xi Jinping "compels" ostensibly private firms to support its military-industrial complex, including raising capital by selling securities on foreign markets, Trump wrote that "the PRC exploits United States investors to finance the development and modernization of its military."

The Trump administration has also [blacklisted dozens of Chinese firms, especially tech giants](#) like Huawei, preventing Americans from doing business with them.

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International Pressure Mounts for UN to 'Fill its Unfulfilled Promise' of Western Sahara Referendum
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

As the conflict in Western Sahara continues, an international chorus is growing, putting pressure on Morocco to abide by its past agreements with the Sahrawi Polisario Front and the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) to enforce the peace and keep its promise.

On Tuesday, [the Sahrawi People's Liberation Army \(SPLA\) announced](#) its 20th day of the offensive, launching attacks on "Moroccan occupation soldiers entrenched behind along the Wall of Shame," a 1,700-mile sand barrier built by the Moroccan military that divides areas occupied by Morocco and those controlled by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Río de Oro (Polisario).

Also on Tuesday, as South Africa assumed the monthly rotating presidency of the United Nations Security Council, Jerry Matjila, Johannesburg's permanent UN representative, [used the moment to call attention to the conflict in Western Sahara](#).

"You know, it is almost a year now since [Personal Envoy of the Secretary-General to Western Sahara] Hans Kohler left. So it is like a frozen, a real frozen conflict. There is no political movement because for over a year there is no political envoy to kickstart the development. So, you have twin problems. The end of the ceasefire by Frente Polisario [...] and the impasse in appointing the envoy. But I think we are optimistic that secretary-general, who briefed us twice in November, that he tried [...] it's tough, there are no takers," Matjila said.

"We trust the secretary general will continue his efforts to try to appoint the envoy, and we hope the parties will cease their fire, and then the UN [will] fill its unfulfilled promise to Saharawis - the referendum. The 1991 decision of ceasefire was based [on the idea that in] 1992, 93, there would be a referendum. Thirty years later [...] no referendum. I think we should admit, all of us have failed the people of Western Sahara."

"The presence of military forces in the Guerguerat area and the buffer strip is a clear violation of a military agreement signed by both parties in 1997 and in 1998, as is the firing of weapons over the region," Ayres said on Tuesday. "A breakdown of the ceasefire in Western Sahara is a threat to both regional and global stability. Already there are concerns about a spillover affecting Mali."

"I urge the United Nations Security Council to take immediate steps to restore the ceasefire and to organise a resumption of negotiations and a plan to deliver a lasting solution to the conflict in Western Sahara," Ayres said. "Any resolution must include the right of the people of Western Sahara to choose their own future. Decades of diplomacy have failed to give what was promised to the people of Western Sahara in 1991: a referendum between independence or integration with Morocco. The vote has been delayed several times."

Spanish Foreign Minister [Arancha Gonzalez Laya told El Peridico on Tuesday](#) that Madrid defends the "central role" of the United Nations, comparing the situation to that of Israelis and Palestinians. Gonzalez also called on UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to appoint an envoy to Western Sahara.

In the United Kingdom, Labour MP Alex Sobel on Tuesday called on the Conservative government to intervene on the behalf of Saharawi political detainees held in Moroccan prisons, including Yahia Mohamed El Hafedh Iza, who were given 15 years in prison in 2008 for organizing a demonstration at which a Moroccan police officer was killed, [according to the human rights organization Front Line Defenders](#).

London-based human rights group [Amnesty International noted that since the collapse](#) of the ceasefire, Moroccan police have cracked down on Saharawi activists in cities under Moroccan control, including Laayoune and Boujdour, arresting at least four and besieging the homes of several others.

Last month, [the Polisario Front called off the 1991 ceasefire with Morocco](#), saying Rabat had undermined both the ceasefire and any hope of a peaceful solution to the country's decades-long occupation of Western Sahara.

The breaking point came in late October as Saharawi activists protested at the El Guerguerat border crossing between Western Sahara and Mauritania, saying the Moroccan military had wrongly militarized the neutral area and was using the border crossing to export raw materials mined in Western Sahara. Moroccan forces eventually dispersed the protesters using violence.

[As Sputnik reported, the protests also aimed to draw attention](#) to a failure of MINURSO to protect Saharawi human rights and to spearhead an independence referendum for the territory, which Morocco invaded and occupied in 1975 as the colonial Spanish forces withdrew.

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Joe Biden Intends to Keep Christopher Wray as FBI Director - Report
by [Mary F.](#)

Christopher Wray is a US lawyer who has served as the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) since 2017 under US President Donald Trump. Wray replaced James Comey, who was dismissed by Trump on May 9, 2017.

Joe Biden will not remove Christopher Wray as FBI director, if Wray is still in that role when the new president takes office in January 2021, [the New York Times reported on Wednesday](#), citing a senior adviser to Biden with insider knowledge.

Specifically, the official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said that Biden's team was "not removing the FBI director unless Trump fired him."

If Biden does not replace Wray, that would signal a return to typical procedure around tenures for FBI directors, who are confirmed by the Senate, have 10-year-terms, and are rarely fired, the Times detailed.

Trump made an atypical decision when he dismissed Comey, the seventh director of the FBI, in 2017, after criticizing him for the FBI investigation into a Hillary Clinton email controversy and claims of Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election.

Earlier this month, [there were reports](#) that Trump was considering firing Wray. According to the Hill, which cited people familiar with the matter, Trump and his allies are frustrated with Wray for not launching an investigation into the business dealings of Hunter Biden, Joe Biden's son, with [Ukrainian gas firm Burisma Holdings](#), and for being resistant to firing officials linked to the 2016 Russia probe.

Two senior White House officials in October also revealed that Trump was considering firing Wray, if reelected.

"Advisers have consistently told POTUS to wait until after the election if he wants to replace Wray," one official told [Fox News at the time](#).

Also in October, the FBI Agents Association sent letters to Biden and Trump stating their support for Wray completing his ten-year term.

"Collectively, our members strongly support Director Wray continuing his 10-year term," [the association wrote](#). "FBI special agents respect Director Wray's leadership and look forward to continuing to work with him to protect this great country from national security and criminal threats."

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Trump to Reportedly Pull Dozens of US Diplomats Out of Iraq as Tensions Grow Between US, Iran

by [Mary F.](#)

Relations between the Trump administration and Tehran have been especially strained since the US assassinated top Iranian General Qassem Soleimani, the head of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) Quds Force, in Iraq on January 3, 2020.

US President Donald Trump is said to be pulling out as many as half of America's diplomats from the US embassy in Baghdad as tensions with Tehran continue to increase ahead of the first anniversary of Soleimani's assassination, [Politico reported Wednesday](#), citing a US official and a State Department official.

Although the US official said that "dozens" of American staffers at the US embassy and other diplomatic facilities in Iraq would be leaving, the State Department official did not offer specifics, other than confirm that staffers would be leaving the country.

The staff reduction is supposed to be temporary but, due to strained relations between the two countries, it's unknown when US diplomats will return to the US embassy in Baghdad.

Iraq is often a battleground for fighting between the United States and Iran. Following Soleimani's death, Tehran retaliated against the White House by launching missiles at US troops housed in Iraq, reportedly causing dozens of soldiers to suffer brain injuries.

Tensions between the US and Iran have been especially high following last month's killing of Mohsen Fakhriadeh, a senior Iranian scientist who helped lead the country's nuclear program.

The top nuclear scientist [was reportedly killed by a remote-controlled machine gun](#) east of Tehran. Iran's Supreme National Security Agency has said that the Israeli spy agency Mossad and the People's Mujahedin Organization, an Iranian political-militant organization banned in the country, were involved in the assassination.

In a statement to Politico on Wednesday, the US State Department did not deny that a staff reduction could be taking place in Iraq.

"The State Department continually adjusts its diplomatic presence at embassies and consulates throughout the world in line with its mission, the local security environment, the health situation, and even the holidays," a department official said in a statement to the outlet. "Ensuring the safety of US government personnel, US citizens, and the security of our facilities, remains our highest priority."

The latest report comes after Trump considered closing down the US embassy in Baghdad after intelligence agencies in September became concerned about attacks against American forces in Iraq and against the embassy itself, [Politico reported at the time](#).

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CDC Director Warns of 'Most Difficult Time' as US COVID-19 Cases to Surge in Winter Months by [Mary F.](#)

The latest data by Worldometer shows that there are more than 64 million cases of the novel coronavirus worldwide and more than 44 million related deaths. In the US alone, there are over 14 million cases and more than 279,000 deaths.

During a US Chamber of Commerce event, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) director, Robert Redfield, said that the US could see another 200,000 COVID-19 deaths in the next three months if people don't take prevention measures seriously, including wearing masks and physical distancing.

"The reality is December and January and February are going to be rough times. I actually believe they're going to be the most difficult time in the public health history of this nation,"

Redfield said Wednesday during the event, [the Hill reported](#).

Redfield's warning comes as COVID-19 cases continue to surge across the country, with at least 2,461 new deaths reported Wednesday, according to the CDC. US states with the highest number of cases include Texas, California, Florida, Illinois, New York and Georgia, in that order, [Worldometer shows](#).

Hospitals in the US are struggling to keep up with the number of patients, with almost 100,000 people hospitalized, [according to the latest data by the COVID Tracking Project](#).

"I do think unfortunately, before we see February, we could be close to 450,000 Americans dead from this virus," Redfield added.

"The truth is, mitigation works. The challenge with this virus is, it's not going to work if half of us do what we need to do. It's not even going to work, probably if three quarters of us do what we need to do. This virus really is going to require all of us to really be vigilant," Redfield added, also noting that he is disappointed by the politicization of mask wearing and conflicting messaging.

"The time for debating whether or not masks work [...] is over. We clearly have scientific evidence," Redfield said, referring to a [CDC study in Kansas](#) that revealed that areas with mask mandates saw decreases in coronavirus transmission compared to areas without mandates, which saw a 100% increase in transmission. "When you really want to get everybody on board, you've got to have clear, unified reinforced messaging. And I think the fact that we were still arguing in the summer about whether or not masks work was a problem".

[Two US pharmaceutical companies](#), Pfizer and Moderna, have completed phase 3 trials for COVID-19 vaccine candidates. The FDA is expected to review this month applications of emergency authorization made by both companies.

Earlier this week, CNBC reported that United Airlines had carried the Pfizer vaccine from Belgium's Brussels to Chicago, Illinois, on Friday, in preparation for early distribution.

So far, Russia is the only country to approve a vaccine for the virus. The drug, named Sputnik V, has 91.4% efficacy 28 days after the first dose and [a 95% efficacy 42 days after the first dose](#).

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'Effort to Protect Mankind': Alleged Chinese Artist of Doctored Aussie Soldier Pic Explains Himself

by [Victoria Teets](#)

The exchange between Australia and China over Beijing's fake image showing an Australian soldier smiling while slitting the throat of an Afghan child comes amid another scandal, with an alleged photo of an unidentified ADF special forces soldier in a bar, drinking a beer from the prosthetic leg of a dead Taliban fighter.

A Chinese graphic artist claimed to have been behind the fake image of an Australian soldier holding a knife to the throat of an Afghan child is taunting the Australian Prime Minister, stating that he would make another piece in response to being "scolded".

Fu Yu, also is known as Qilin, [reportedly created the manipulated image](#) to criticize Australia over the damning Brereton war crimes inquiry, whose military recently released a shocking report describing war crimes by elite troops, reports ABC News AU.

The Brereton investigation looked into alleged war crimes committed by Australian SAS forces and found there was "credible information" to suggest they had murdered at least 39 Afghan civilians and prisoners, including children.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian tweeted the doctored image on Monday, prompting Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison to call it "truly repugnant" and demand it be removed and Beijing issue an apology.

Fu reacted to Morrison in a video shared by Chinese media on microblog site Weibo, the Australian news outlet reported.

Fu described himself as a "wolf-warrior artist", echoing Beijing's aggressive diplomacy in recent years.

"I get scolded by this Australian person called Morrison, and he demands my apology," said Fu, who identified himself as the owner of Beijing Wuhe Culture and Creativity Company.

"I feel sympathetic for him and fully understand Morrison's feelings right now," he added in what was reported to have been a sarcastic response, adding, "But I would advise Morrison to face reality, and put his attention and effort on his domestic affairs."

"I created this CG illustration based on my anger and shuddering. The artwork was simply created out of a sense of humanitarianism," Fu reportedly wrote for the Chinese state-owned media outlet Global Times.

"What I have produced looks like an absurd scene, but it is something that really happened somewhere in this world," he suggested, adding, "I hope that more people will see this painting and pay attention to this real tragedy."

Fu said he used an Australian flag to cover some of the depictions of bodies of Afghanistan civilians behind the soldier, which contrasted with a small sheep in the boy's arms.

"What I have produced looks like an absurd scene, but it is something that really happened somewhere in this world," Fu was reported to have stated.

ABC AU reports that Fu urged the Australian prime minister to "make sure his government's military force becomes more disciplined to avoid any similar international tragedy", describing his own work as an "effort to protect mankind".

"He should put less effort on pressuring and condemning a fact-based artwork and an artist who is ordinary and from a foreign country," Fu reportedly stated.

"If I have energy tonight, I can make another artwork as my response."

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'The Doctor America Needed': Dr. Anthony Fauci Named Among People Mag's '2020 People of the Year'
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and the top infectious disease expert in the United States, was recently honored for his efforts in fighting the global HIV/AIDS crisis and nominated for Time magazine's "Person of the Year." People Magazine [announced Wednesday](#) that Dr. Anthony Fauci, "the doctor America needed in 2020," would join actors George Clooney, Regina King and Selena Gomez as the magazine's "2020 People of the Year."

During an extensive interview with the magazine, the top national medical expert noted that in dealing with the emergence of HIV, anthrax attacks, Ebola, Zika and COVID-19, he's learned that "you need to focus very intensively, like a laser, on the job that you have, because there are so many other issues involved that could distract you from what your main goal is."

While Fauci - who sits on the White House Coronavirus Task Force - has served for decades under both Republican and Democratic administrations, he has continuously been criticized by US President Donald Trump and several others in Trump's administration regarding the federal government's approach to handling the COVID-19 novel coronavirus.

Prior to the 2020 presidential election, attendees at a Trump Opa-Locka, Florida, rally [broke out into a "fire Fauci" chant](#).

"Don't tell anybody but let me wait until a little bit after the election," Trump told the crowd. "He's a nice man, though. He's been wrong on a lot."

Fauci currently retains his post but, according to the infectious disease expert, the level of divisiveness surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic in the US is worrisome.

"When you have an outbreak, everyone needs to pull together because everyone is in it together. When you have obvious sharp differences, politically and otherwise, that gets in the way of a unified response," he said during the magazine interview.

"I mean I've been doing this for 36 years as director of the institute. I've seen disagreements. I've seen political issues get in the way over the 36 years," Fauci noting, adding, however, "but I've never seen the extent of the divisiveness which leads to hostility against public health measures."

Fauci joins other government officials, including New York Governor Andrew Cuomo and Trump, on the 2020 ballot for [Time's "Person of the Year."](#)

Everyday people, including essential workers and firefighters, are also nominated for the coveted title and magazine cover won by climate activist Greta Thunberg in 2019.

Fauci was also honored with a Lifetime Achievement Award during a virtual ceremony hosted by the US Global Leadership Coalition earlier this week.

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'Such a Miracle': Baby Born From 27-Year-Old Embryo Following Family's Infertility Struggles
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Following their in vitro fertilization journey, the Knoxville, Tennessee, family welcomed a baby girl born of one of nearly 300 embryos annually adopted or transferred via the city's National Embryo Donation Center.

"I never thought I would be able to have a pregnancy, have a baby, such a miracle such a sweet, sweet miracle," Tina Gibson said to WATE, some weeks after giving birth to a daughter, Molly Everette Gibson.

Dr. John Gordon, an IVF specialist, detailed that industry technology has helped places like the Knoxville NEDC to perform increased amounts of embryo adoptions and transfers.

In Tina's case, the NEDC worked with her and husband Benjamin Gibson through the clinical process of embryo adoption and an embryo transfer into her uterus.

"The ability to freeze these embryos in liquid nitrogen at negative 170 degrees, will keep them in the state of animation," [Gordon told WATE](#). "When you think about embryos being frozen, they are a group of cells that have the potential to go on and become a baby."

The Gibson family told the outlet that they had struggled with infertility prior to the birth of their first child, Emma Wren, in 2017.

Emma Gibson was also born following an IVF and embryo transfer.

"With Emma, we were just so smitten to have a baby," the mother [said to CNN on Tuesday](#).

The family acknowledged the medical concerns regarding the age of the embryos, both of which were frozen on October 14, 1992.

"With Molly, we're the same way. It's just kind of funny -- here we go again with another world record," the mother remarked.

According to Dr. Jeffrey Keenan, who also spoke to CNN, there is no known evidence of an embryo's age impacting the outcome of a pregnancy.

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Planned Parenthood Affiliate Executive Resigns After Employees Allege Racist Workplace Behavior
by [Evan Craighead](#)

A regional director with Planned Parenthood has officially resigned from her position, but employees say there is still work to be done to undo reported racial misconduct.

Workers at Planned Parenthood Pennsylvania Advocates (PPPA), a nonpartisan political arm of Planned Parenthood, [penned an open letter](#) regarding executive director Emily Callen, who,

they say, "has been fiscally irresponsible, used racist, transphobic, classist language, and language which perpetuates stigma against abortion."

The memo highlighted that Cullen caused "harm" during her nine-month tenure as executive director by refusing "to hold contractors accountable for repeatedly misgendering trans and non-binary staff and using racist terms like "illegals" to refer to undocumented immigrants." She also allegedly "belittled and dismissed the only woman of color on senior staff for bringing up issues of racism in the organization."

Signed by the entire PPPA staff, 15 bullet points relating to Cullen's misconduct were listed in the letter.

"During Emily Callen's tenure at PPPA she has continuously deprioritized abortion access and addressing anti-blackness," PPPA regional field director Cortney B. [said in a quoted statement](#).

"In that time she has also harmed BIPOC [for Black, Indigenous, and People Of Color] and trans staff with her unwillingness to be held accountable and listen to staff concerns about the pervasive culture of white supremacy at PPPA."

Cullen responded to the remarks before ultimately resigning.

"I've read the open letter published by Save PPPA, and take the claims in that letter very seriously," [she wrote](#). "All of you are the core of what we do. Your leadership must hold itself to high standards, and listen when you speak up about any failures to uphold our mission and values."

Dayle Steinberg, board chair for the PPPA, [announced](#) that the organization's board of directors and senior leadership would examine the issues raised in the open letter.

According to Steinberg, the PPPA will look to review its hiring practices and "invest resources in long-term anti-racist training for the board of directors, executive director and the senior leadership team."

An audit of "all external and internal communications materials" will take place alongside the establishment of "an internal committee for review."

This comes just months after the National Organization for Women (NOW) president, Toni Van Pelt, announced that she would step down from her position on August 28.

"I have been ignoring my doctor's advice and my health for too long, so I have made the very hard decision to retire and step down as President of NOW," she wrote in an email to NOW members [obtained by The Daily Beast](#).

While Van Pelt claimed it was her health that made her step down, the seemingly abrupt move came after the [outlet published an investigation](#) that revealed some 15 former NOW employees and interns had accused her of racism.

Van Pelt was also reported for saying that she only chose former vice president Gilda Yazzie, who is Native American, as her running mate because she needed a non-white running mate to win.

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'Grave Concerns': Trump 'Serious' About Veto Threat on Defense Bill Over Section 230 - White House

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

US President Donald Trump late Tuesday tweeted his opposition to Section 230, claiming that the legal protection offered to tech companies by third parties and users was a “serious threat” to the nation.

The current White House press secretary, Kayleigh McEnany, [told reporters at a Wednesday briefing](#) that Trump is “serious” about following through on his threat to veto the annual defense bill should congressional lawmakers fail to repeal the decades-old federal protection.

“Yes, the president is serious about it,” McEnany suggested, when asked about Trump’s threat to the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) bill. “There are real grave concerns here and the president stands by that.”

Trump [in a pair of Tuesday tweets](#), claimed that Section 230 of the 1996 Communications Decency Act poses a “serious threat to our national security and election integrity,” describing the measure as “very dangerous [and] unfair.”

Section 230 is considered one of the internet’s foundational laws, as it spares sites and services from being held liable for the content posted by its users. The legal protection itself has come under increasing scrutiny, as tech giants have been accused of failing to effectively crack down on hate speech and election misinformation.

The threat itself is just the latest in the president’s ongoing stance against social media giants such as Facebook and Twitter, companies which Trump alleges are biased against conservative Republicans after the platforms flagged social media posts violating company rules. Social media platforms note that the practice of flagging posts attempts to stop the spread of misinformation and false claims.

Since Election Day, Facebook and Twitter have both [flagged a variety of posts from Trump](#) in the which the president continues to allege [voter fraud](#), as well as multiple posts in which he claimed that the [2020 election had been “rigged.”](#)

However ‘serious’ Trump’s threats to veto the defense bill are, congressional lawmakers have vowed to move forward with the final version of the NDAA, without bending the knee to the demands of the current commander-in-chief.

Senate Armed Services Chair Jim Inhofe (R-OK) [stated Wednesday](#) that, while he does agree with Trump on his opposition to Section 230, the provision “has nothing to do with the military.” “You can’t do it in this bill. That’s not a part of the bill,” Inhofe told reporters on Capitol Hill, adding that he made his stance clear to the president.

Trump’s Tuesday night veto threat is the second he’s made regarding the NDAA this year. The president previously promised over the summer that he would veto the defense funding bill if it did not remove language requiring the renaming of US military installations honoring Confederate generals. The president has subsequently made no mention of his threat.

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Biden: ‘I’ve Done Something Good for the Country’ by Preventing Another Trump Term
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Although US President Donald Trump has yet to concede the 2020 election over allegations of rampant voter fraud, the transition to a new administration is now underway as a result of the General Services Administration's move to formally acknowledge Democratic candidate Joe Biden as the projected winner.

Biden remarked to New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman in a [a piece published on Wednesday](#) that he felt that he'd "done something good for the country by making sure that Donald Trump is not going to be president for four more years."

He noted, however, that "there's been no moment of elation" on account of Trump's repeated claims of election fraud, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the stunted US economy, which has prompted unemployment concerns over the last ten months.

"It's just one of those moments. There's a lot of work to do," Biden said. "I'm just focused on getting some things done as quickly as I can."

Biden has promised that, once in the Oval Office, he intends to quickly implement measures to further curb the spread of COVID-19 within the nation. Since the US media's call for a Biden win on November 7, the projected president-elect has [indicated that his team](#) will work to provide free coronavirus testing while also widening its availability to the general public. Additionally, the Biden team aims to pass a comprehensive economic plan to aid Americans and businesses struggling to make ends meet.

The [latest figures](#), provided by the Johns Hopkins University, state that the US has documented at least 13.76 million COVID-19 cases, [of which 180,083 were reported on Tuesday alone](#).

California, where hospitals are increasingly overwhelmed with coronavirus cases, remains the US state with the highest tally of daily reported COVID-19 cases.

Although the Biden team has acknowledged the work done to create viable COVID-19 vaccine candidates, focus has shifted to bolstering a strong distribution plan, ahead of the anticipated Biden 20 January, 2021, inaugural.

Rick Bright, an immunologist and member of Biden's coronavirus transition task force, [indicated in Monday remarks](#) that he believes there are gaps in the current administration's distribution plans, specifically in terms of providing funding to promote immunization programs in states.

Eyeing the 'Best China Strategy'

Under the Trump administration, relations between the US and China have remained strained as a result of trade taxes the two nations have implemented against each another. Biden told the Times that in order to mend matters, he will first carry out a "full review" of current deals and reignite talks with foreign allies.

"The best China strategy, I think, is one which gets every one of our - or at least what used to be our - allies on the same page," Biden said. "It's going to be a major priority for me in the opening weeks of my presidency to try to get us back on the same page with our allies."

He added that talks with allies in Asia and Europe will be necessary "so we can develop a coherent strategy."

However, with one president exiting and another incoming, a changing of the guard isn't likely to prompt an easing toward Beijing. Biden explained this his goals with China "would be to pursue trade policies that actually produce progress on China's abusive practices - that's stealing intellectual property, dumping products, illegal subsidies to corporations."

The Trump administration has repeatedly accused Beijing of stealing US intellectual property, with the current FBI director, Christopher Wray, [saying at a February conference](#) that the agency believed “no country poses a greater threat than communist China.” Recently, Zhao Lijian, a spokesperson for the Chinese Foreign Ministry, criticized the comment, telling reporters during a Tuesday briefing that the oft-repeated rhetoric is “[nothing but sour grapes](#).” Tapping on Trump’s ‘America First’ approach to global diplomacy, Biden told the Times that he wants to “make sure we’re going to fight like hell by investing in America” before looking to back projects elsewhere. Biden explained that there are vast opportunities within energy, biotech, advanced materials and artificial intelligence that are ripe for large-scale government investment.

“I’m not going to enter any new trade agreement with anybody until we have made major investments here at home and in our workers” and in education, he told the outlet.

Rural America Won’t Be Left Behind

Biden acknowledged that individuals living in rural America had been “forgotten” by Democrats, underscoring that the party won’t be able to progress without support in those areas.

“You know, it really does go to the issue of dignity, how you treat people. I think they just feel forgotten. I think we forgot them,” Biden said. Noting he holds “respect” for rural Americans, the former vice president stated that he plans to prove it by “tackling the virus” in “red and blue areas alike.”

“[We have] got to end the rural health care crisis right now by building on Obamacare, assuming it survives at all, with a public option [and] automatically enroll people eligible for Medicaid,” he suggested.

“There’s strong support for that - and particularly [from] people in rural states, like Texas and North Carolina, that reject expansion. We can boost funding. I visited 15 rural hospitals. And the biggest problem is there’s not enough reimbursement for them to be able to keep open.”

“We have got to rebuild the middle class,” Biden said, adding “especially in rural America.”

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‘They Were Whipped, Beaten’: US Supreme Court Weighs Child Slavery Case Against Nestle, Cargill

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

For the last 15 years, multinational corporate food giants Nestle USA and Cargill have been engaged in a legal battle, after International Rights Advocates filed a lawsuit alleging that the two companies profited from child slavery on Ivorian cocoa plantations from which where they purchased products.

Terry Collingsworth, executive director of International Rights Advocates, told [Radio Sputnik’s Political Misfits on Wednesday](#) that he believed that the US Supreme Court justices, who are now reviewing the case, did not give the impression that they would side with Nestle and Cargill.

“Based on the questioning, I got the feeling that this time the companies have broached a bridge too far,” Collingsworth said. “Asking even this [conservative] court to say that slavery is legal for corporations in the year 2020, I don’t think they bought it.”

The lawsuit was filed in 2005, on behalf of six former child slaves from Mali who were trafficked to the Ivory Coast to work on a cocoa plantation that sold products to both companies. At the center of the case is a [1789 US law known as the Alien Tort Statute](#) that allows non-US citizens to seek damages in US courts for acts in violation of international law.

The case itself has been juggled back and forth in the court system for several years and has been dismissed on two occasions. It wasn’t until the San Francisco-based 9th US Circuit Court of Appeals [ruled in October 2018](#) that the two multinational corporations were liable, after determining that their corporate offices had knowingly “aided and abetted” child slavery.

By July 2020, the [US Supreme Court granted a request](#) by Nestle and Cargill to review the case. Both corporations are arguing that companies should be immune from international law violations, such as child slavery, and suggest that only individuals should face liability.

Collingsworth told hosts Michelle Witte and Bob Schlehuder that the experiences of the six Malian men were by no means defined as modern slavery. “They were captured, they were held captive and they were forced to work against their will for years before they were rescued,” he said.

Three of the six individuals suffered severe treatment that Collingsworth stated was “nothing short of torture when they tried to escape.” He added that “they were whipped, beaten. One of them had the bottom of his feet slashed with a machete and had pepper rubbed in to punish him for trying to get away.”

Earlier this year, a [study funded by the US Department of Labor](#) determined that nearly 1.6 million children are engaged in cocoa production taking place in Ivory Coast and Ghana - two primary cocoa suppliers. According to the survey, the majority of the tasks assigned to child labor, those between the ages of 12 and 18, are considered to be the most hazardous.

Collingsworth stressed that a child slave labor “system” only exists because multinational corporations like Nestle and Cargill habitually outsource their products in hopes of paying bottom dollar for labor.

“It’s incredible,” he said of the defense argument. “Not only are they using child slaves, but they went to the Supreme Court yesterday and argued with a straight face that corporations themselves cannot be liable for slavery in the international system. That is just incredible.”

The Supreme Court is expected to issue a ruling on the case by the end of June, 2021.

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Over 100,000 COVID-19 Patients Currently Hospitalized in US – COVID Tracking Project

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) – The number of coronavirus patients, who currently remain in hospitals across the United States, has exceeded 100,000 for the first time since the start of the outbreak, the COVID Tracking Project said.

The exact number of hospitalized patients stands at 100,226.

This number is almost twice higher than during the first wave of the pandemic in spring. At the same time, the percentage of patients treated in hospitals is lower than in spring. Some states reported that they were facing a shortage of hospital beds.

The World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic on March 11. To date, more than 64.3 million people have been infected with the coronavirus worldwide, with over 1.4 million fatalities, according to Johns Hopkins University (JHU).

The United States remains the worst-hit nation both in terms of the number of cases (over 13.9 million) and fatalities (more than 273,000), JHU adds.

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Arizona County Agrees to Expand Ballot Review as Result of Trump Lawsuit - Board

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - County election officials in the US state of Arizona said they agreed to expand a review of duplicated ballots as a result of a lawsuit brought by the Trump campaign over alleged irregularities.

The move comes a day after the state certified the results and awarded Democratic nominee Joe Biden Arizona's 11 electoral votes. Biden beat Trump by more than 10,400 votes, less than one percent of total ballots cast.

"The [Maricopa County] Board of Supervisors directed the County Attorney to offer to expand the duplicated ballot review by up to 2,500 ballots," the board said in a statement on Wednesday.

On Tuesday, the county examined 100 randomly selected ballots and 100 signatures on mail-in ballot affidavit envelopes per a judge's order, the release added. Republican officials said three irregularities were found among the 100.

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Russia Ready to Join Efforts With US Against COVID-19, Share Vaccine - Ambassador

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - Russia is open for cooperation with the United States in fighting the coronavirus pandemic and will be ready to share a vaccine against the disease, Russian Ambassador Anatoly Antonov said at an event hosted by a Washington think tank.

"It seems to me that we shouldn't try to launch competition on this issue. We should unite our efforts. If we have a vaccine that could protect Americans, we are ready to share with you," Antonov said at the Brookings Institution online event on Wednesday.

Russia emerged as a leader in vaccine development with two of its products, Sputnik V, developed by Moscow's Gamaleya Institute, and EpiVacCorona, developed by Siberia's

research center Vector, are completing Phase 3 clinical trials. On Wednesday, Russian President Vladimir Putin instructed the government to start mass vaccination by the end of the next week.

Antonov reaffirmed Russia's aspirations to have better relations with the US.

"We are still in a good mood. We are still in favor to develop our relations," he said. "I would like to use all positive elements that we had before and we have now."

Ambassador named six areas where he believes closer ties are possible - strategic stability, non-proliferation, fight against terrorism and COVID-19, space and cybersecurity. Antonov added that he is "dreaming" to see Russia's Defense and Foreign ministers come to Washington to unblock 2+2 channel of communications with their American colleagues.

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Russia, US Continue Talks on Extending New START During Post-Election Period - Antonov

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - Russia is continuing talking with US negotiators to extend the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) despite the fact the United States is in a post-election period, and still sees an opportunity to reach an agreement before the treaty expires, Russian Ambassador Anatoly Antonov said.

"We have time. We can get it very quickly," Antonov said during an online event at the Brookings Institution on Wednesday. "We are still in a dialogue. We hope we will continue it for a foreseeable future."

Antonov noted that he is in "a close contact" with Marshall Billingslea, the US Special Envoy for Arms Control and a top negotiator on the New START.

The New START is the last major arms control treaty between the United States and Russia that caps their nuclear warheads and delivery systems stockpiles. Unless an agreement is reached to extend the treaty, it is set to expire on February 5.

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Special Deportation Flight Leaves US With 23 Russian Citizens on Board - Embassy

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - A special deportation flight to Russia left the United States on December 2 carrying 23 Russian citizens, previously held in US penitentiaries, on board, the Russian Embassy in Washington said in a statement.

"On December 2, a special deportation flight to Russia departed Harrisburg international airport (PA) carrying 23 Russian citizens on board. All of them were held in US penitentiaries for various offenses," the embassy said.

"This flight was organized thanks to the close cooperation of the Embassy with the US Immigration And Customs Enforcement (ICE)," it said.

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US House Passes Bill to Restrict Some Chinese Companies in Stock Market

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives has passed legislation that would prevent some Chinese companies from listing their shares on US stock exchanges unless they adhere to auditing standards.

The House of Representatives on Wednesday passed the Holding Foreign Companies Accountable Act by voice and the measure now heads to US President Donald Trump's desk for signature.

The US Senate unanimously passed the legislation in May. The measure requires foreign companies to disclose if they are state-owned or controlled and bans foreign companies from trading on the US stock market if they fail to comply with US auditing standards.

Senator John Kennedy, who introduced the bill in March of 2019, said the measure would stop China from cheating on the US stock exchanges, adding that China's failure to comply with US disclosure laws has already impacted investor confidence and the integrity of financial markets. Although the United States has been able to enter into cooperative auditing agreements with foreign regulators, it has not reached such an agreement with China.

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Russia Would Welcome US Return to Iranian Nuclear Agreement - Ambassador

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - Russia would welcome the possible United States return to the nuclear agreement with Iran after the Trump administration withdrew from the accord, Russian Ambassador to Washington Anatoly Antonov said.

"It goes without saying that we would welcome the potential decision of the United States to return back to this deal," Antonov said during a Brookings Institution online event on Wednesday.

Presumed President-elect Joe Biden said before the November 3 election that the United States would rejoin the Iran nuclear agreement as a starting point for follow-on negotiations if Iran returns to strict compliance.

The agreement, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), placed restrictions on Iran's nuclear program in return for sanctions relief.

The United States reached the agreement during the administration of President Barak Obama when Joe Biden served as Vice President. Current President Donald Trump withdrew the United

States from the accord in 2018 and decided to pursue a maximum pressure campaign against Iran.

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Russia to Recognize US President After Legal Procedures Finalized - Antonov

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - Russia will recognize the US President after all legal procedures under US laws are finalized, Russian Ambassador Anatoly Antonov said during virtual discussion at Brookings Institution.

"We need to wait some legal procedures in your country when all official results will be announced. After this event everything will be done according protocol," Antonov said on Wednesday when asked whether Russia would recognize Joe Biden as new US president. Antonov emphasized that Russia considers the election of the president of the United States to the country's internal matter.

"We consider that it is the American people that decide who will run this country. We will recognize any choice that your people make," Antonov added.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said last week that Russian President Vladimir Putin will congratulate the US president on his victory in due time.

Major US media networks have projected Democratic nominee Joe Biden to be the winner of the November 3 presidential election. However, US President Donald Trump has said he won, but victory was stolen from him via massive election fraud and acts of impropriety.

Trump is seeking redress via recounts and lawsuits in state and federal courts and has vowed not to concede to what he has termed as election theft. Several US states have said they did not find evidence of widespread fraud and substantial irregularities.

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Centers For Disease Control Cuts Coronavirus Quarantine to 7-10 Days - Senor Doctor

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - Quarantine periods for people exposed to the novel coronavirus can be safely cut to seven or ten days depending on the circumstances, Centers For Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) official Dr. Henry Walke told a phone press conference.

"Under these options, quarantine can end after ten days without a COVID-19 test if the person has reported no symptoms or after seven days if with a negative test result if the person has reported no symptoms," Walke said on Wednesday.

Walke, who is in charge of overseeing the day-to-day management of the coronavirus pandemic, CDC has identified the two new acceptable alternative quarantine periods after reviewing and analyzing new research and modeling data.

"A shorter quarantine period can lessen stress on the public health system and communities, especially when new infections are rapidly rising," Walke said.
People should still watch for symptoms during quarantine for a full 14 days after exposure, especially if quarantine is discontinued early, Walke added.

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Trump Says Constitutional Process Must Continue, Every Vote Legally Cast Counted

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump said in pre-recorded statement that the constitutional process must be must continue and all legal votes have to be accounted for.

"The constitutional process must be allowed to continue," Trump said on Wednesday. "We are going to defend the honesty of the vote by ensuring that every legal ballot is counted and that no illegal ballot is counted."

Trump added that the right to vote is at the heart of American democracy and the integrity of the 2020 presidential and future elections is at stake.

As many states continue to finalize and certify the results of the US presidential election, major US news networks have called the 2020 US Presidential election for Democratic nominee and former Vice President Joe Biden.

Trump has also claimed victory, disputing the projections and initiating a number of legal challenges, contesting the election results in several key battleground states citing alleged wide-spread election fraud.

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US Blocks China Cotton at Border Claiming Use of Convict Labor - Homeland Security

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - The US government has issued an order to block cotton imports from a Xinjiang governmental organization in China, claiming they have been produced by the use of convict labor, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) announced in a press release.

"The US Department of Homeland Security announced today that US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) personnel at all US ports of entry will detain shipments containing cotton and cotton products originating from the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC)," the release said on Wednesday.

The Customs and Border Protection's Office of Trade directed the issuance of a Withhold Release Order (WRO) against cotton products made by the XPCC based on information that reasonably indicates the use of forced labor, including convict labor, the release said.

"The WRO applies to all cotton and cotton products produced by the XPCC and its subordinate and affiliated entities as well as any products that are made in whole or in part with or derived from that cotton, such as apparel, garments, and textiles," the release added.

The WRO on XPCC cotton products is the sixth enforcement action that the CBP has announced in the past three months against goods made by forced labor from China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, according to the release.

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IMF Warns Lebanon Needs a Government to Begin Rebuilding After Beirut Explosion

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - Lebanon needs to form a government to begin rebuilding an economy devastated by a massive explosion four months ago, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said in a press release following an international donors conference hosted by French President Emmanuel Macron.

"We endorse the broad principles for reforms needed to restore macroeconomic and financial stability outlined in the Reform, Recovery and Reconstruction Framework (3RF) presented today," the release said on Wednesday. "Regrettably, despite our multiple engagements at technical level ... in the absence of an empowered government, we have not gone very far."

Lebanon has been without a government since the August 10 resignation of Prime Minister Hassan Diab, who continues to serve in a caretaker capacity. Diab stepped down less than a week after a massive explosion destroyed much of the port of Beirut.

Reforms discussed at Wednesday's conference include restoring solvency to government accounts, repairing the nation's banking system, rehabilitating money losing state-owned businesses and audits of key institutions including the central bank, the release said.

Even before the August 4 Beirut explosion, decades of rampant corruption resulted in the disappearance of billions of dollars, according to speakers at the conference.

Macron told participants that Lebanon can expect no international aid until the nation establishes a government that is willing to implement reforms.

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US Sees Uptick in China Re-Vectoring Influence to New Administration - Official

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - The United States has noted that China is boosting efforts to redirect its influence onto what is expected to be the incoming Biden administration, National Counterintelligence and Security Center Director William Evanina said.

"I think the last few months, you know, parallel to the elections, we've been dealing very heavy on the COVID-19 front and China's efforts to forth that," Evanina said on Wednesday. "But

we've also seen an uptick which was planned and we predicted that China would now re-vector their influence campaigns to the new administration."

Evanina pointed out the authorities are starting to see this dynamic to play out across the United States and also with respect to people in the expected Biden administration.

Relations between the United States and China have been strained since 2017, when Washington updated its National Security Strategy to portray China as a major threat to US interests.

Relations further soured in 2018, when the United States imposed tariffs on Chinese imports in a bid to balance the trade deficit, but entered a tariff and trade war.

Last week, Chinese President Xi Jinping sent a congratulatory message to Biden on what he said was Biden's victory in the US presidential election and expressed hope the troubled China-US relations would improve.

Major US media networks projected Biden to be the winner of the presidential election.

However, President Donald Trump has said he won but victory was stolen from him via massive election fraud and acts of impropriety.

Trump is seeking redress by seeking recounts and filing lawsuits in court to enable counting only of legal votes and discard illegal ones. Several states have said they did not find evidence of widespread election fraud and substantial irregularities.

Meanwhile, Trump has agreed to allow the transition process to begin while recounts and lawsuits are taking place and results are being certified.

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US House Passes Bill to Restrict Some Chinese Companies in Stock Market

WASHINGTON, December 2(Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives has passed legislation that would prevent some Chinese companies from listing their shares on US stock exchanges unless they adhere to auditing standards.

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US Marines Obtain Data by Disassembling Captured Syrian Anti-Tank Missiles - CENTCOM

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - US Marine bomb technicians obtained valuable data by disassembling four captured Syrian anti-tank missiles, the Central Command (CENTCOM) said in a press release.

"Our explosive ordnance disposal technicians are uniquely qualified to disassemble a wide range of foreign munitions," US Marine Corps Captain Joshua Hays said in the release on Wednesday. "During the exploitation process, EOD [Explosive Ordnance Disposal] technicians were able to gather valuable weapons data and retrieve biometric information to be analyzed." Technicians disassembled and then destroyed four AT-4B Spigot anti-tank guided missiles, which were recently obtained by partner forces in southern Syria, the release said. Although exact details surrounding the weapon system arriving in Syria are unknown, the forensic data collected will hopefully provide a better understanding of illicit weapons trafficking patterns in the region and help partner forces protect civilians from unexploded ordnance, the release added.

In 2020 alone, approximately 100 individual pieces of ordnance have been processed and destroyed by Marine technicians, about 30 percent of which were manufactured in Iran or Russia, according to the release.

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Russia's Antonov Says Uncertain If Moscow, Washington to Succeed in Improving Arms Control

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) – Russian ambassador to the US Anatoly Antonov said that it remains unclear whether Moscow and Washington will succeed in improving the arms control situation, despite Russian efforts to extend the last remaining arms control pact between the two countries.

"Despite Russia's recent new initiatives, today there is no certainty that we will succeed in improving the situation," Antonov said during a virtual discussion at the Brookings Institution in Washington.

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US to Announce New China Charges in Next 6-8 Weeks - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - The United States is going to continue charging China for malign activities in the coming weeks, US Assistant Attorney General for National Security John Demers said.

"There are cases that will come to a charging state actually over the course of the next six to eight weeks," Demers said during the virtual session of Aspen Cyber Summit on Wednesday. Demers promised to help what is expected to be the upcoming Biden administration in solving these issues, while accusing China of malign behavior.

"We will march forward as malign activity marches forward," Demers said. "We are not going to pause for a few months."

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik)

NAGORNO-KARABAKH PEACE PROCESS

* Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and his Azerbaijan counterpart Jeyhun Bayramov discussed over the telephone the progress in implementing provisions of the trilateral agreement on Nagorno-Karabakh, the Russian Foreign Ministry said on Wednesday.

* Russia wants all its partners within the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) to join the humanitarian aid effort in Karabakh, President Vladimir Putin said.

US POST-ELECTION DEVELOPMENTS

* The Department of Defense is moving ahead in cooperating with presumed President-elect Joe Biden's Transition Task Force, spokesperson Sue Gough said on Wednesday.

* All 110 counties in the US state of Georgia are expected to finish recounting ballots by midnight on Wednesday, with Democratic nominee Joe Biden likely to emerge as the winner, Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger said.

CSTO MEETING

* The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) may set up a center to detect threats to collective security, the CSTO declaration said on Wednesday.

* The leaders of the CSTO propose to organize a meeting of CSTO, CIS, SCO, OSCE, NATO and EU authorized representatives to discuss the security strategies of the countries, the declaration said.

* CSTO countries reaffirm their solidarity and support for UN Secretary General's call for an immediate and global ceasefire in all parts of the world in connection with the pandemic, the declaration said.

INTRA-AFGHAN PEACE PROCESS

* The Afghan government and Taliban have agreed on the structure of intra-Afghan talks and can start negotiations on the agenda, member of the negotiating team for the Afghan government Nader Nadery said on Wednesday.

* Deborah Lyons, the UN envoy for Afghanistan and the head of the UNAMA assistance mission, welcomes the progress achieved by the Afghan government and the Taliban movement in the peace process, UNAMA said.

* Lyons met with leaders of the Taliban movement in Doha, where they reaffirmed their commitment to faster progress in the crisis settlement, UNAMA said.

CORONAVIRUS VACCINE

* Russia is in contact with international initiatives on the coronavirus vaccine development and is looking forward to deepening this cooperation, given that Global Vaccine Alliance has a goal of more than 2 billion doses," an official with the Russian Health Ministry said Wednesday.

* Additional data on the efficacy of Russia's Sputnik V vaccine against the coronavirus will be published in a top peer-reviewed magazine, CEO of the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) Kirill Dmitriev said.

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Biden COVID-19 Advisory Board Pledges to Fight Disproportionate Virus Impact on Minorities

WASHINGTON, November 2 (Sputnik) - President-elect Joe Biden's COVID-19 Advisory Board pledged to address the outsized impact of the pandemic on minorities in a meeting with the US Hispanic community, the transition team said in a statement Wednesday.

"Biden-Harris Transition COVID-19 Advisory Board Co-chair Dr. Marcella Nunez-Smith and board member Dr. Robert Rodriguez met with Latino and immigrant workers and providers to hear directly from individuals who have been impacted by the COVID-19 crisis," the release said.

The meeting emphasized a commitment by the Biden administration "to addressing the disproportionate impacts of the coronavirus pandemic in communities of color," the release added.

The roundtable also focused on challenges for front-line pandemic workers, support for families and increasing hospitalization rates for COVID-19 victims, according to the release.

Successful late-stage trials of coronavirus vaccines have prompted public health officials to speculate that the pandemic will begin to wind down with the anticipated inoculations of hundreds of millions of people as early as the summer of 2019.

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US Congress Reaches Deal on Defense Budget With New Tools to Deter Russia, China

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - The leaders of the US Senate and House armed services committees have reached a deal on a new defense spending bill that includes new measures to deter China and Russia, the House Armed Services Committee said in a press release on Wednesday.

"We have reached bicameral agreement on the FY21 NDAA [National Defense Authorization Act], which authorizes funding for the Department of Defense and the national security programs of the Department of Energy," the release said.

The release said the NDAA includes "important new tools to deter China and Russia," including provisions that strengthen the United States' alliance with Israel, and provisions on artificial intelligence and cybersecurity.

Earlier in the day, Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Jim Inhofe told reporters that a measure to repeal Section 230 would not be included in the new defense spending bill, adding that he informed President Donald Trump about the decision.

Trump said Section 230 is a liability shielding gift from the US government to "Big Tech" and represents a serious threat to US national security and election integrity. The US president added the United States can never be safe and secure if it allows Section 230 to stand and he would unequivocally veto the NDAA if Section 230 is not removed.

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US Pulls Dozens of Diplomats From Iraq - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - The United States is withdrawing as many as half of its diplomats from the US embassy in Baghdad amid high tensions with neighboring Iran, who might seek vengeance for high-profile assassinations, Politico reported on Wednesday.

A downsizing of the American Embassy in Baghdad is timed to the upcoming first anniversary of the US airstrike that killed last January an Iranian military commander Qassem Soleimani who was visiting the Iraqi capital.

The staff reduction is supposed to be temporary, the report said, citing confirmation by a US official and a State Department official. The report said it was unclear when fuller staffing will resume given the downward trajectory of US-Iranian relations.

Fears also are that Iran, who has significant combat capabilities in Iraq through Shiite militias, may attempt to retaliate to last month's killing of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, its top nuclear scientist. Israel, America's major ally in the Middle East, is suspected to be behind his death.

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US Economic Recovery Modest to Weak in November as COVID Raged - Fed Beige Book

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - US economic recovery was modest at best in November as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic continued for a tenth straight month, the Federal Reserve's "Beige Book" report revealed on Wednesday.

"Most Federal Reserve Districts have characterized economic expansion as modest or moderate since the prior Beige Book period," the Fed said, referring to the period between end-October and end-November. "However, four districts described little or no growth, and five narratives noted that activity remained below pre-pandemic levels for at least some sectors." Most districts reported that firm business outlooks, the Beige Book said, though it noted that optimism had also waned on concerns over a new wave of the pandemic, mandated restrictions on operations and how long the moratorium on evictions and foreclosures would continue.

The Fed noted that while employment rose, the pace was slow.

"Firms that were hiring continued to report difficulties in attracting and retaining workers. Many contacts noted that the sharp rise in COVID-19 cases had precipitated more school and plant closings and renewed fears of infection, which have further aggravated labor supply problems, including absenteeism and attrition."

The US economy grew by a record 33.1 percent in the third quarter, after shrinking by 31.4 percent in the previous three months and 5 percent in the first quarter.

Despite the third quarter rebound, the US economic outlook remains dire with a rash of new coronavirus infections reported across a nation with 13.7 million COVID-19 cases since January and over 270,000 fatalities related to that. US COVID-19 hospitalizations have hit daily record highs of above 100,000 in recent weeks, even as vaccine developments for the virus have shown promise.

On the jobs front, the United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April, at the height of lockdowns forced by the COVID-19. A rebound of 2.5 million jobs was logged in May and 4.8 million in June, before the recovery began slowing. For September and October, there were less than 700,000 jobs added each month.

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UN Chief to Take COVID-19 Vaccine as Soon as One Becomes Available - Spokesman

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Spokesman) - UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres will try a COVID-19 vaccine as soon as one is available, spokesman Stephan Dujarric told reporters on Wednesday.

"For the secretary general, yes, as soon as the vaccine is available I have no doubt that he will take one," Dujarric said.

Guterres, however, would want those who need protection the most, such as front line workers, to get the vaccine first, Dujarric added.

The UK on Wednesday became the first country to authorize use of a the vaccine developed by Pfizer, one of three leading candidates in the US Warp Speed program. Other countries have also developed vaccines and Russian President Vladimir Putin, also on Wednesday, ordered his government to begin a large-scale vaccine campaign next week.

Russia is the only country so far that has offered to supply UN staff with vaccines. The UN is discussing plans with both Moscow and the World Health Organization, Dujarric said.

On Thursday, the UN plans to hold a COVID-19 summit in which Guterres plans to call for vaccines to be treated as public goods, available to all people in all countries regardless of a nation's development status, according to Dujarric.

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No Data Yet on How Long Vaccinated Person Will Be COVID Free - CDC Director Redfield

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - There is no data yet on how long a person who gets a COVID-19 vaccination will remain immune from the virus, US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Robert Redfield said Tuesday.

"We just don't know how long," Redfield told a live-streamed event, responding to a question on how long a COVID-19 vaccine would work for for someone who gets it. "We don't know if it's going to be six months. We don't know if it's going to be for a year. But I think it really is a gift to have these vaccines (and) to see 95 percent efficacy for the first two."

Redfield was commenting on the vaccines developed by Pfizer and Moderna, both of which were reported to be 95 percent effective in clinical trials. The two drug makers have applied for emergency use authorization from the US Food and Drug Administration to fast track their doses to the market to immunize people as soon as possible as the pandemic rages anew in the United States.

US healthcare workers and nursing home residents will get the first of the COVID-19 vaccines once the doses are rolled out in the coming weeks, CDC officials told a briefing on Tuesday. CDC slides released at the briefing showed the agency expecting around 40 million COVID-19 vaccine doses to be available by the end of December, with shipments of 5 million to 10 million doses being made per week once a vaccine is authorized by regulators.

Moncef Slaoui, an adviser to the Trump administration's "Operation Warp Speed" plan on COVID-19 vaccines, also said Tuesday that some 60 million to 70 million doses could be available per month beginning in January, after expected FDA approval of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines.

Additionally, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo said on Wednesday the state will receive by December 15 its first COVID-19 vaccines from Pfizer Inc that would be enough to immunize 170,000 people.

Redfield reiterated that he expected that every American who wanted a COVID-19 vaccine would be able to get one by the second or third quarter of 2021. "I've said that publicly and it has been criticized by others, but I think those estimates are probably going to be right on target." More than 13.7 million Americans have been infected with the coronavirus since January and more than 271,000 have died of related complications, data tracked by the Johns Hopkins University showed. In recent weeks, daily hospitalization of those infected have reached more than 100,000.

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US Restructures Atlantic Fleet to Counter Russia Off East Coast - Navy Secretary

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - The US Navy has reactivated the Atlantic Ocean fleet command to counter alleged Russian ventures near America's eastern shores, Secretary Kenneth Braithwaite said at a senate hearing on Wednesday.

"Fleet Forces Command will [become] the US Atlantic Fleet," Braithwaite told the Senate Armed Services Committee.

The current 2nd and 4th Fleets will be directed through the Atlantic Fleet Command, he added. Braithwaite said the change was being made to "confront" the Russian Navy as it had been been deploying closer to the US eastern coast.

Earlier this year, US Navy Vice Admiral Andrew Lewis said the US eastern coast is no longer safe amid Russian submarine activity in the Atlantic. Lewis said a Russian intelligence vessel was detected off the East Coast of the United States in late 2019.

US officials, despite these concerns, have said Russian ships operate lawfully and have not entered US territorial waters.

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Republicans Ask Pennsylvania Court to Reverse Rejection of Bid to Invalidate Votes - Docs

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - The Republican party in the battleground state of Pennsylvania is asking the state's highest court to reverse its dismissal of a lawsuit seeking to invalidate millions of votes pending a decision from the US Supreme Court, a court document revealed on Wednesday.

On Tuesday, US Republican Congressman Mike Kelly filed a request to the US Supreme Court for an emergency injunction to prevent the Pennsylvania authorities from taking any additional actions to perfect the certification of the November election results.

"Petitioners, the Honorable Mike Kelly, Sean Parnell, Thomas A. Frank, Nancy Kierzek, Derek Magee, Robin Sauter, Michael Kincaid, and Wanda Logan, by and through their undersigned counsel, jointly submit this Emergency Application for Stay of this Court's Order of November 28, 2020, pending the filing and disposition of a Petition for Writ of Certiorari in the Supreme Court of the United States," the court document said.

Pennsylvania officials have already certified the election results, declaring that Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden had won by more than 80,000 votes in the state.

Trump campaign lawyers, after scores of lawsuits alleging irregularities, have failed to block official vote certification in key battleground states won by president-elect Joe Biden. Every major US media outlet projected Biden to be the winner of the presidential election more than three weeks ago. The head of every major government election security agency said the 2020 vote was the safest in US history.

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UN-Ethiopia Agreement Allows Unimpeded Relief Access to Tigray - Spokesman

WASHINGTON, November 2 (Sputnik) - The Ethiopia government and United Nations officials based in the country agreed to open the province of Tigray to relief supplies for refugees displaced by the recent fighting, UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric told reporters on Wednesday.

"The UN staff in the country and the federal government of Ethiopia have signed an agreement that seeks to enable unimpeded, sustained and secure access for humanitarian personnel and services in areas under the control of the federal government in Tigray and the bordering areas," Dujarric said.

A month of fighting has forced at least 1 million people to flee their homes, many to areas bordering the province and others into neighboring Sudan, according to media reports. That would be in addition to a 600,000 people who depended on outside aid before conflict erupted in November, according to UN estimates.

On Wednesday, UN teams prepared for aid shipments with assessment and response missions in areas bordering Tigray, Dujarric added.

Hostilities erupted in northern Ethiopia last month when the central government accused the Tigray region's political forces of attacking a military base in the region. The conflict pits Tigray's People's Liberation Front (TPLF), a political party that dominated the nation's politics for decades, against a government led by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who came to power in 2019.

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US Sanctions Sidekick of Mexican Drug Lord Kingpin Quintero - Treasury Department

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - The US government has imposed sanctions on a Mexican national whom it says worked as a lieutenant for a notorious narcotics trafficker and accused murderer Rafael Caro Quintero, the Department of the Treasury announced in a press release on Wednesday.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated Mexican national Lucio Rodriguez Serrano (Rodriguez Serrano) as a Specially Designated Narcotics Trafficker pursuant to the Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act (Kingpin Act)," the release said.

Rodriguez Serrano had carried out activities on behalf of Rafael Caro Quintero, a major Mexican narcotics trafficker and the mastermind behind the murder of Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) Special Agent Enrique "Kiki" Camarena in 1985, the Treasury Department said.

"Bringing Rafael Caro Quintero to justice is a top priority for the DEA. He was responsible for the brutal torture and death of a DEA Special Agent in 1985, and we will not rest until he is apprehended. He continues to direct a major cartel that smuggles drugs into this country. DEA Acting Administrator Timothy Shea said in the release.

Caro Quintero and Rodriguez Serrano, both natives of Badiraguato, Sinaloa, Mexico, have been lifelong friends and Rodriguez Serrano has helped Caro Quintero evade capture while carrying out real estate transactions on his behalf, the Treasury Department said.

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Top US Diplomat To Speak in OSCE about Conflicts in Post-Soviet States - State Department

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - US Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun plans to speak during the virtual OSCE Ministerial Council on Thursday about crises in former Soviet Republics, including unrest in Belarus and recent hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh, according to a statement from the Department of State's Office of the Spokesperson.

Biegun is also expected to call attention to conflicts involving Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova and to denounce what the statement describes as "Russian malign action and hybrid threats."

"Biegun will also urge action to address human rights abuses and the repression of civil society and independent media, economic and environmental issues, and the need to rebuild military transparency by negotiating an update to OSCE's Vienna Document on Confidence and Security-Building Measures," the State Department said.

In the virtual meeting Biegun will join foreign ministers and senior officials of the 57 states participating in The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

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US COVID-19 Death Toll Could Reach Nearly 450,000 Before February - CDC Director

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - The US COVID-19 death toll could reach 450,000 before February, Robert Redfield, director of the nation's Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), said Wednesday, raising by almost 200,000 current fatality numbers from the pandemic.

"Before we see February, (there) could be close to 450,000 Americans (that) have died from this virus," Redfield told a live-streamed event on the pandemic. "But that's not a fait accompli if the American public really embraces social distancing, wearing masks, not letting your guard down in family gatherings."

More than 13.7 million Americans were infected with the coronavirus since January and more than 271,000 have died of related complications, data tracked by the Johns Hopkins University showed.

"In the spring, we lost about a hundred thousand people and we lost another hundred thousand in the summer," Redfield said. "These are, you know, sacred lives that were lost as a consequence of this pandemic. We're potentially looking at, you know, another hundred fifty to two hundred thousand people before we get into February."

Redfield said one of the CDC's biggest concerns was having more than 80,000 people in hospitals across the country now from COVID-19 related complications, and that the health system could be overrun.

"As we sit here today, 90 percent of our hospitals in this nation are actually in what we call one of the hot zones (and) therefore at risk for increased hospitalization and potential to negatively impact hospital capacity," he said. "Ninety percent of all of our long-term care facilities are in what we call high-transmission zones. So we are at a very critical time right now in our ability to maintain the resilience of our health care system in the (coming) spring."

In recent weeks, US COVID-19 hospitalization hit daily rates of more than 100,000 as Americans moved around more freely after a brief lull in the pandemic's effects post-summer.

US airports screened 1.8 million passengers on the weekend of the November 26 Thanksgiving holiday, the highest since March, despite the CDC advising Americans not to travel for the occasion.

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Plans to Create New Expeditionary Fleet to Cover Pacific, Indian Oceans - Navy Chief

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - The US Navy has decided to go ahead with plans to commission a new First Fleet as an expeditionary striking force to operate in the Western Pacific and Indian Oceans, Secretary of the Navy Kenneth Braithwaite told a hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee on Wednesday.

"The decision has been made, yes, in consultation with INDOPACOM (India-Pacific Command)" and other command and planning bodies, Braithwaite said. "We are going to recommission the First Fleet which like the Seventh Fleet would operate in the Pacific."

Braithwaite pointed out that the new force would not remove ships from the currently operational Third and Seventh Fleets.

Instead, the First Fleet's major focus would be on providing expedition striking power capabilities in the Western Pacific and Eastern Indian oceans, he said.

On October 27, Braithwaite at birthday celebrations for the US Marine Corps called for the Navy to establish a new fleet closer to the boundary of the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

No One at White House Questioned Over Alleged Bribery-Pardon Scheme - Press Secretary

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany said in a press briefing on Wednesday that no one at the White House has been questioned in connection to the Justice Department's (DOJ) probe into an alleged bribery-for-pardon scheme. "No, in fact the DOJ official said yesterday that no government official was or is currently a subject or target of the investigation disclosed in this filing," McEnany said when asked if anyone at the White House has been questioned over the alleged scheme.

On Tuesday, US District Judge Beryl Howell unsealed court documents about an alleged scheme that involved a substantial political contribution in exchange for a presidential pardon or reprieve of sentence. The names of those targeted in the investigation were redacted.

President Donald Trump said the bribery-for-pardon investigation is "fake news."

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White House Condemns Violent Rhetoric Against US Elections Officials - Press Secretary

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - The White House condemns all violent rhetoric against US election officials, Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany said in a press briefing on Wednesday. "We condemn any threats against anyone, there's no place for violence," McEnany said when asked if President Donald Trump condemns threats against US election workers.

On Tuesday, Georgia Voting Systems Manager Gabriel Sterling said that continuing claims of fraud by Trump and Republican lawmakers have put the lives of state election workers in danger.

In a tweet responding to Sterling, Trump continued to allege massive election and voter fraud in Georgia that has contributed to stealing his election victory and has criticized the state's governor and secretary of state for it covering-up. Several US states have said they did not find evidence of widespread election fraud and substantial irregularities.

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Trump 'Serious' About Vetoing Defense Spending Bill Over Social Media Clause - White House

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump is seriously considering vetoing the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) if Section 230 - which provides protections to social media platforms and allows them to censor content - is not eliminated, White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany told reporters on Wednesday.

"Yes, the President is serious about it," McEnany said when asked whether Trump is serious about vetoing the NDAA over the Section 230. "There are real grave concerns here and the President stands by that."

McEnany made the comment after Trump issued a statement on Monday warning that he intends to veto the NDAA if Section 230 of the Communications Act that provides immunity to social media platforms that publish third-party content is not removed from the text.

Trump said Section 230 is a liability shielding gift from the US to 'Big Tech' and represents a serious threat to US national security and election integrity. The US president added the United States can never be safe and secure if it allows Section 230 to stand and he would unequivocally veto the NDAA if Section 230 is not removed.

Trump on Friday accused the media of deliberately targeting him by hiding his "real message" and called for a termination of Section 230. The incumbent president also criticized Twitter and claimed that it makes up false "trends," censors and discriminates against conservatives.

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US Modifying Presence in Somalia to Counter Al-Shabab Terror Group - Joint Chiefs Chair

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - The United States is working on modifying the presence of US forces in Somalia in order to counter the al-Shabab terror group, which is affiliated with al-Qaeda (banned in Russia), US Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Mark Milley said during a Brookings Institution panel discussion on Wednesday.

"Somalia is an ongoing debate right this minute - not so much as to what our footprint is, it's what the footprint will look like," Milley said. "We recognize that al-Shabab in the lower Jubba river valley is a threat... We're taking a hard look at the repositioning of the force to better enable us to conduct counterterrorism operations."

Milley said al-Shabab if left unattended may conduct operations against US interests and potentially operations that could reach American soil.

Milley said the US presence in Somalia is small and low cost but high risk, pointing out that a CIA officer was killed in the country last month.

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Israel's Prime Minister Urges Key Coalition Partner Gantz to Prevent Early Elections

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said in a televised address on Wednesday that he sees no need for early elections amid the novel coronavirus crisis and urged his chief coalition partner Benny Gantz to halt the dissolution of the country's parliament.

Netanyahu spoke just hours after the Knesset adopted in preliminary reading a bill to dissolve itself with Gantz's Kahol Lavan faction voting in favor of the initiative. The bill needs three readings to come into law and bring about early elections - the fourth election in two years.

"Benny Gantz has to hit the brake, he has to stop dragging Israel to elections... It's not too late. In no case should Israel be allowed to be dragged into election politics when we need to fight coronavirus, save lives and restore the economy," Netanyahu said.

Netanyahu said the people of Israel want unity, not polling stations, and they want a vaccine, not an election campaign, adding that the only way to defeat the coronavirus is to win together.

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Biden to Keep FBI Director Wray if He Survives Under Trump - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - US President-elect Joe Biden plans to keep FBI Director Christopher Wray in office if he is not fired by the current administration, The New York Times reported on Wednesday, citing a campaign official.

Such a move would potentially be a reversion to the standard practice of FBI chiefs serving 10-year terms.

Biden's spokesperson refused to comment on the report, the newspaper said.

In May 2017, Trump fired FBI Director James Comey amid the early stages of the Russia probe, which led to the appointment of Robert Mueller as Special Counsel. Trump's pick Wray was confirmed by the Senate about three months after Comey's firing.

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Pentagon Advances Cooperation Process With Biden-Harris Transition Team - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - The Department of Defense is moving ahead in cooperating with presumed President-elect Joe Biden's Transition Task Force, spokesperson Sue Gough said in a statement on Wednesday.

"This week, the Transition Task Force is focusing on onboarding ART [Agency Review Team] members, including workspaces, processing of temporary badges, non-disclosure agreements

and other administrative matters; preparing responses to the initial requests for information from the ART," Gough said.

Gough noted that the Transition Task Force was also coordinating requested interviews between ART members and Defense Department officials.

"Per the Presidential Transition Act, [Defense Department] policy and the memorandum of agreement between the White House and the Biden-Harris Transition Team, office space has been provided, and some members of the ART were given a brief tour of their office spaces this week," Gough said.

The Defense Department Agency Transition Director and key members of the Defense Department Transition Task Force held the first meeting, virtually, with ART leadership, on November 25, Gough added.

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US Executing Plans to Reduce Troop Presence in Afghanistan By January 15 - Milley

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - The Trump administration is making progress on its intent to reduce the number of US troops in Afghanistan to 2,500 by January 15, Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Mark Milley said on Wednesday.

"We're in the process of executing that decision right now," Milley said during a virtual panel discussion at the Brookings Institution.

Resolute Support Mission Commander Gen. Austin Miller and Central Command head Gen. Frank McKenzie have made recommendations to acting Defense Secretary Christopher Miller regarding which US bases in Afghanistan should be closed.

Milley said the Acting Defense Secretary has approved the base closures but declined to reveal details about which ones will be closed.

In early November, Miller announced plans to reduce by January 15 the number of US troops in Afghanistan and Iraq to 2,500 in each country.

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Trump 'Serious' About Vetoing Defense Spending Bill Over Social Media Clause - White House

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US Secret Service to Expand Workforce From 7,700 to 10,000 by 2026 - Director

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - US Secret Service (USSS) looks forward to expanding its workforce from 7,700 to 10,000 in 2026, the agency's director James Murray said on Wednesday.

"Our workforce is around 7,700, but with continued support of Congress and the administration we are looking to get somewhere around 10,000 in 2026," Murray said during a virtual session of the Aspen Cyber Summit.

The hiring process involves the whole spectrum of jobs, not just the investigation area, the USSS chief said. People interested in fighting cybercrimes can join the agency as analysts or other specialists and do not need to be special agents, he added.

The US Secret Service, among other duties, is responsible for protecting sitting presidents and vice presidents, their families, former presidents and their close relatives, in addition to visiting foreign leaders and major presidential and vice presidential candidates. The federal law enforcement agency also conducts probes of alleged financial and cyber crimes.

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NATO Foreign Ministers Discuss Black Sea Security With Ukraine, Georgia - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - Top diplomats from NATO, Ukraine and Georgia discussed security in the Black Sea at the alliance's foreign ministerial, State Department spokesperson Cale Brown said on Wednesday.

"Allied leaders spoke candidly with the Ukrainian and Georgian Foreign Ministers about Black Sea security," Brown said in a statement following the two-day virtual summit. "Other discussions focused on Russia, arms control, regional security, NATO 2030 and the Forward Looking Reflection Process, and strengthening shared bonds and values between NATO and its Asia-Pacific partners."

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo during the session underscored China's threat to Allied security interests and called for enhanced cooperation, Brown said. Pompeo also reaffirmed Washington's commitment to the alliance, the spokesperson added.

Georgia and Ukraine are among NATO's Enhanced Opportunities Partners along with Australia, Finland, Jordan and Sweden.

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Ex-CISA Head Krebs Says US Election 'Fairly Quiet' With Respect to Foreign Interference

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - Former US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) chief Christopher Krebs said on Wednesday the November election was "fairly quiet" with respect to foreign interference.

"What we saw... was actually a fairly quiet election on the foreign interference landscape," Krebs said in an online interview with the Washington Post.

Krebs noted Iran's role in sending out threatening emails to voters and accused Russia of conducting "a really broad scanning campaign" - gathering details about specific websites in what usually represents a preparatory stage for a hacking attack.

"Out of abundance of transparency and out of abundance of caution, where we did see them plant to voter election systems, election information, not voting system themselves, we felt it was important to disclose that and share that with the American people," Krebs said. "That was a much broader Russian cybercampaign - its scanning campaign. As far as I [know], it's still underway."

Russia has repeatedly denied accusations of meddling in the US political system, saying such actions go contrary to the proclaimed principles and practice of the country's foreign policy.

Krebs said CISA was prepared for a comprehensive set of foreign interference scenarios coming from Russia, Iran, China, North Korea and cybercrime groups and individuals.

"You could call it paranoid," he said. "We had almost four years to prep[are], the last administration had about four months. You can't buy that time. You can't really find any other substitute. We had more visibility. We were looking over there, we were hardening systems here."

Krebs also praised social media platforms for their proactive stance in countering "malign interference." Such stance made adversaries change their behavior and they are not as successful as they used to be, he said.

Krebs was fired by President Donald Trump on November 17, five days after CISA distributed a statement from a group of federal and state officials who called the 2020 election "the most secure in American history" and said that they found no evidence of votes being tampered with. Trump has said his election victory was stolen via massive fraud and acts of impropriety, and is seeking redress via recounts and lawsuits in state and federal courts. Trump, his legal team and related lawyers have charged the voting machines from the Dominion Voting Systems - a Canadian firm housing the US election results via a company in Spain and utilizing servers in Germany - and the Smartmatic software were used in the election fraud.

Several US states have said they have found no evidence of widespread election and voter fraud and substantial irregularities.

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US Joint Chiefs Chairman Expects Biden Administration to Modify National Defense Strategy

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - US Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Mark Milley said during a think-tank event on Wednesday that he expects the incoming Biden administration to modify the National Defense Strategy.

"Are there some things that need to be modified for next administration? Yes and I think that they will likely do that," Milley said during a Brookings Institution virtual panel discussion.

Milley said a "rising China" and its growing military is a primary concern for the United States.

In addition, Milley said he expects the US defense budget to flatten out due to the impact of the novel coronavirus pandemic measures on the US economy.

In January 2018, the Trump administration rolled out a new National Defense Strategy that sought to revamp the US military to counter growing threats from China, Russia and other countries.

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US Space Force Clears Upgraded Missile Warning Satellite for 2021 Launch - Lockheed Martin

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - The US Space Force certified that the fifth Space Based Infrared System Geosynchronous Earth Orbit Satellite (SBIRS GEO-5) - the most advanced thus far - is complete and ready for launch in 2021, the manufacturer Lockheed Martin said in a press release on Wednesday.

"Both SBIRS GEO-5 and GEO-6 are slated to join the US Space Force's constellation of missile warning satellites, equipped with powerful scanning and staring infrared surveillance sensors," the release said.

Lockheed Martin explained that the sensors collect data that allow the US military to detect missile launches, support ballistic missile defense, expand technical intelligence gathering and bolster situational awareness on the battlefield.

The GEO-5 and GEO-6 satellite feature greater resiliency and cyber-hardening; enhanced spacecraft power, propulsion and electronics; common components and procedures to streamline manufacturing; and a flexible design that reduces the cost to incorporate future, modernized sensor suites, the release said.

The SBIRS satellites launched earlier detected more than 1,000 missile launches in 2019 alone, the release added.

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Global Airlines Urge EU, UK to End 'Ineffective' Traveler Virus Restrictions - Trade Group

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - European and global aviation groups want quarantine rules for airline travelers ended based on new series of studies showing restrictions do little to prevent contracting the novel coronavirus, the International Air Transport Association (IATA) said in a press release on Wednesday.

The IATA release calls on EU and UK aviation and health agencies to "immediately abolish passenger quarantines as EASA/ECDC [European Aviation Authority/European Center for Disease Control] guidelines confirm their ineffectiveness."

The release cited the latest guidelines from both agencies confirming that air travelers account for less than 1 percent of all coronavirus cases and do not increase the rate of virus transmission.

IATA said European air passenger traffic is down nearly 90 percent from pre-pandemic levels, despite testing facilities opened at 102 airports across Europe that serve nearly half of all airline passengers.

The release recommended that airports and airlines deploy coronavirus tests that deliver results within minutes to ensure virus-free flights.

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US Consumer Confidence Recovers From COVID-19 Plunge to 2016 Election Level - Poll

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - An index measuring consumer's confidence in the US economy continued a slow recovery from an April crash due to the coronavirus pandemic measures to match levels just prior to the November 2016 presidential election, a new Gallup poll revealed on Wednesday.

"The index, which had been positive throughout President Donald Trump's term until March, plunged to -33 in late April amid widespread business and school closures across the country at the start of the pandemic. It has since been improving gradually and is now back to the level seen just before the 2016 election," a press release explaining the poll said.

After gradually rising in most months since April, the index is now back to minus 1, the 2016 pre-election level, the release said.

The Gallup Economic Confidence Index is based on monthly polls asking US adults to label current economic conditions as excellent, good, fair or poor, and then asking whether the economy is getting better or getting worse, the release added.

The index has a theoretical range between plus 100 - if everyone labels the economy excellent and improving - and minus 100 if everyone calls the economy poor and getting worse.

Apart from the index, Gallup said October poll showed no improvement in Americans' overall outlook, with 55 percent continuing to say the economy is still getting worse.

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Second Ballot Recount in US State of Georgia Confirms Biden Lead – Top Election Official

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) – All 110 counties in the US state Georgia are expected to finish a second recount ballots by midnight on Wednesday, with former Vice President Joe Biden still likely to emerge as the official winner, Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger said news briefing on Wednesday.

"We have seen no substantial changes to results from any county so far. That's what we expected," Raffensperger said. "It looks like [former] Vice President Biden will carry Georgia and he is our president-elect."

Raffensperger also backed a warning by his deputy, Voting Systems Manager Gabriel Sterling on Tuesday, that continuing claims of fraud had put the lives of state election workers in danger, adding that Sterling's comments have "our full support."

In a tweet responding to Sterling, President Donald Trump continued to allege massive voter fraud in Georgia, despite an earlier assessment by Attorney General William Barr that he had not seen any evidence of fraud on a scale that could change the election results.

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Ballot Recount in Georgia Confirms Biden Lead, Final Results Due Today - Official

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - All 110 counties in the US state of Georgia are expected to finish recounting ballots by midnight on Wednesday, with Democratic nominee Joe Biden likely to emerge as the winner, Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger said on Wednesday.

"We have seen no substantial changes to results from any county so far. That's what we expected," Raffensperger said during a press briefing.

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Russia to Increase Coronavirus Vaccine Production Globally - Minister

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - Russia is working to increase the production of its Sputnik V vaccine against the coronavirus both domestically and abroad, Russia's Minister of Health Mikhail Murashko said on Wednesday.

"We are going to increase the production of the vaccine in Russia and globally. It currently ranks among top candidate vaccines approaching the end of clinical trials and the start of mass production on the World Health Organization list," Murashko said during the presentation of the vaccine at the United Nations.

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US Envoy for Afghanistan Welcomes 'Milestone' Achieved by Afghan Government, Taliban

WASHINGTON, December 2 (Sputnik) - US Special Representative for Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad praised on Wednesday as a significant milestone an agreement between the Afghan government and the Taliban opposition movement on rules and procedures for negotiating a political road map and a comprehensive ceasefire.

"I welcome the news from Doha that the two Afghan sides have reached a significant milestone: A three-page agreement codifying rules and procedures for their negotiations on a political roadmap and a comprehensive ceasefire," Khalilzad tweeted. "This agreement demonstrates that the negotiating parties can agree on tough issues. We congratulate both sides on their perseverance."

Earlier in the day, the sides announced finalizing the procedure for the intra-Afghan peace talks. "The people of Afghanistan now expect rapid progress on a political road map and a ceasefire. We understand their desire and we support them," Khalilzad said.

He promised to work hard with all sides for a serious reduction of violence and even a ceasefire during negotiations.

The United States and the Taliban - Afghanistan's major armed opposition movement - signed a peace agreement in February that paved the way for reducing violence in the country, a gradual troop withdrawal and for intra-Afghan negotiations that started in Qatar in September. The US has said the Taliban has since ceased attacking foreign troops, but continues to target Afghan forces, hampering the progress towards a comprehensive conflict resolution.